Use Teacher Effectiveness Tools to Enhance Your Coaching Quality

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Teacher effectiveness research has the potential to positively impact your coaching practices. To be successful, coaches must be willing to examine research and the world around them for factors that foster successful teaching, especially in the area of motor skill learning. Those elements then need to be incorporated into your own coaching pedagogy.

I explored this concept a number of years ago and ultimately published an article in the Arkansas Journal about the process. It was entitled, "Linking Coaching Behaviors to Teacher Effective Principles." The article was based on transferring research based teacher effectiveness principles from the "classroom" to the playing fields and/or courts. A reverse transfer is also possible. A landmark example of such involved the work of Tharp and Gallimore (1975) when they looked at the successful coaching methodologies of the legendary John Wooden. Coach Wooden was very adamant about the teaching descriptor associated with coaching and he was credited with the axiom of "you haven't taught until they have learned."

The catalyst for this body of work was a recent article by Stephen Silverman (2011) that appeared in the August 2011 issue of the Journal of Physical Education, Recreation and Dance. Entitled, "Teaching for Student Learning in Physical Education," the manuscript was based on an Alliance Scholar Lecture that Dr. Silverman presented at the 2011 American Alliance of Health, Physical Education, Recreation and Dance convention in San Diego, California. The

article cited research involving five important variables that can impact motor skill learning. These elements included time, practice, tasks, classroom organization, and skill level.

Time

Concentrated time spent on motor skills and technical skills is related to success. This implies that "the more time devoted to instruction, the more students learn" (Silverman, 2011, p. 30). Caution must be taken, however, that you do not mistake activity for achievement. There are several practical steps that coaches can take to insure that players reap the maximum amount of quality instructional time in sport-specific skill instruction. Some practical measures include the following: 1) minimize your management behaviors and verbal instruction during drill periods; 2) design drills to accommodate an optimal number of players; 3) utilize descriptive drill names that immediately allow players to recognize the techniques and basic routines encompassed within the drill; 4) make sure any drill equipment is proximal to your drill area; and 5) use some type of self-assessment tool to periodically examine your personal coaching behaviors. If "repetition is the mother of learning" (Sabock & Sabock, 2011, p. 243), then each player must receive an ample number of drill repetitions, performed correctly, in order to improve motor skill proficiency levels.

Another concept relative to repetitions and motor skill learning merits notation. Silverman's (1988) research indicated "the more time spent learning a team sport in game-like situations, the less skill development occurred" (Silverman, 2011, p. 30). Hence, small-sided games and/or drills emphasizing a limited number of sport-specific skills may provide better motor skill learning results than time spent in full-sized games or activities.

Practice

"Appropriate practice is the most important variable in student learning of motor skills" (Silverman, 2011, p. 31). A key to this variable lies in the definition of appropriate practice. Silverman (2011) defined appropriate as being practice that is not too difficult nor too easy.

Drills need to be constructed so that participants have a reasonable chance to be successful. This success will create confidence which, in turn, will beget further success. Drills should also be altered if they prove to be too difficult or too easy, and it becomes a matter of defining the purpose of the drill, establishing an acceptable success level, and then adjusting the drill to account for improved skill levels on the part of players.

The creativity and planning that go into drill structure and implementation play a significant role in the provision of success-oriented activities in coaching. The significance of such preparation is important because "inappropriate student practice—that which is too hard (or in limited cases, too easy—is negatively related to skill learning" (Silverman, 2011, p. 31).

Tasks

If athletes have difficulty mastering a motor or technical skill, it will restrict their amount of appropriate practice. Thus, there will be a need to stop instruction, modify the skill, and then resume practice. In addition, the necessity for clear explanations and proper demonstrations prior to performing any skills is fundamental to the learning process.

The ability to analyze skills and make appropriate error corrections is obviously significant in terms of appropriate practice. One potential instructional aid in this process, according the Silverman (2011), was Dr. Judy Rink's five-step model of content development. The five tasks consist of informing, extension, refinement, application and repetition.

Classroom Organization

Heterogenous ability levels of athletes will require that coaches adjust some aspects of their instructional behaviors. For example, the low-skilled athlete may need less task complexity than counterparts. How do you make the necessary accommodations for this athlete without impeding the learning environment of the medium- to high-skilled athlete? Do you break the continuity of a drill to correct one or two players or do you offer remedial instruction in a post-practice setting via an "opportunity to improve" period? I would suggest the latter with an emphasis on positive, enthusiastic, and instructional focus.

Skill Level

Low-skilled athletes need "appropriate practice." As such, it is important to remember that individuals vary relative to their learning abilities. This concept was appropriately framed by Silverman when he stated that "teachers who maximize appropriate, individual, student practice are teaching each of the students in the class, not teaching the class as a whole" (Silverman, 2011, p. 33). The challenge, then, for coaches is how to replicate the concept in a learning environment that is more competitive than a "classroom" environment. One of the ultimate feats of a quality coach is to maximize the skill levels all athletes. If you accept this premise, then I would suggest you explore all available avenues to make it happen. One such path lies in the use and adaptation of teacher effectiveness research to coaching practices.

The goal of coaches is really for athletes to be successful and this requires a constant evaluation of resources and what we can learn from others.

References

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